



Position statement: Heart healthy neighbourhoods

Putting policies in place to develop
heart healthy neighbourhoods.

Summary

- Cardiovascular disease remains a major cause of death in Australia, and many of its risk factors are preventable through healthier lifestyles and environments.
- People in Australia value being physically active locally and living within easy walking distance of everyday destinations.
- Walkable neighbourhoods are associated with healthier cardiovascular risk profiles, yet many neighbourhoods in Australia are yet to provide the conditions that support recommended levels of physical activity.
- The most important features for healthy, affordable living are compact local neighbourhoods, appropriate density, mixed land use, diverse housing, green infrastructure, and connected active and public transport.
- Housing, transport, planning and infrastructure decisions are also health decisions. They influence physical activity, social connection, healthy eating, time in nature, air and noise pollution, climate impacts and health equity.
- Governments at all levels should embed health objectives into policy and funding decisions for housing, transport, planning and infrastructure.

Neighbourhood design is a preventive health issue

Cardiovascular disease is one of the most significant public health issues in Australia. In 2024, it accounted for one in four deaths.¹ More than half of people in Australia have three or more risk factors for disease, many of which are preventable through healthier lifestyles.¹

Neighbourhood design is an important determinant of heart health, because the places where people live can support or limit healthier lifestyles.²

People rely more on private vehicles when everyday destinations such as shops, schools, services, healthy food and parks are far from home, or lack safe, shaded routes for walking, wheeling, bike riding and public transport.³ This leaves people with fewer practical opportunities to build physical activity and social connection into everyday life, and it adds to air and noise pollution and climate change, which can affect cardiovascular health.⁴

There is community support for neighbourhoods that make active living easier. Research conducted for the National Heart Foundation of Australia (Heart Foundation) in 2025 found that 93% of people surveyed believe it is important to be physically active in their local area. A further 94% said that living within easy walking distance of local destinations is important to them.⁵

Healthy neighbourhoods support heart health

The Heart Foundation asked leading researchers across Australia to review the most recent evidence on what makes healthier neighbourhoods.* The review found that compact, walkable and green urban environments can support healthy behaviours as part of everyday life.

What makes a neighbourhood healthy

The review shows that the most important features of healthy neighbourhoods are:

- appropriate density
- mixed land uses
- adaptable and diverse housing
- well-connected networks for walking, wheeling, bike riding and public transport
- green urban infrastructure.

Appropriate density is fundamental, because it brings enough people to support nearby destinations that are within walking distance.³ Mixed land uses place homes close to local services such as retail (including healthy food), workplaces, healthcare and entertainment.³ A mix of housing types and sizes supports affordability and accessibility across different ages, life stages and abilities, and gives older people more local options to remain active.³

Well-connected networks put walking, wheeling, bike riding and public transport first. This people-first approach to public road space makes active travel safer and more convenient.⁴

Green urban infrastructure, including trees, parks and shade, cools streets and makes them more comfortable places to walk and spend time.²

*The review papers are available on the Heart Foundation Publications and policies page: healthyactivebydesign.com.au/resources/publications_and_policies

How good neighbourhood design improves heart health

Together, the features noted above can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease.^{2,3} They do this through six connected pathways.



Figure 1. A visual summary of the main pathways through which built environments can support healthier lifestyles and better heart health

More physical activity

Safe, inclusive walking, wheeling and bike riding infrastructure, together with slower vehicle speeds, encourages more people to choose active and public transport and to build physical activity into everyday life.⁴ International research shows that people who live in walkable neighbourhoods are more likely to reach sufficient levels of physical activity,⁶ and more likely to have a healthy cardiovascular risk profile, than people in areas where walking is unsafe, inconvenient or difficult.⁷ Calmer traffic with slower speeds is also linked to higher physical activity and active travel among children and young people.⁸ Modelling from Brisbane estimates a saving of around \$118,000 for every 1,000 people, through fewer cases of ischaemic heart disease, if short car trips under 2 km were replaced with walking.⁹

Stronger social connection

Loneliness and social isolation affect heart health through behavioural, psychological and physiological pathways.¹⁰ Healthy neighbourhood design provides spaces that support social connection and a sense of belonging, including open green spaces, libraries, local shops and cafes, community gardens, walking and cycling paths, and public transport.¹¹ Green spaces offer chances to connect that other settings may not, such as picnics and other outdoor gatherings.^{12,13} For adults who live alone, having 30% or more parkland within 1.6 km of home is associated with a 50% lower risk of loneliness.¹⁴

More time in nature

Spending at least two hours in nature each week brings a range of health benefits.¹⁵ Studies show a strong link between higher amounts of green space in walkable areas and better cardiovascular health.¹⁶ Research in Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong found that, where tree canopy cover reached 30%, cardiovascular disease was 22% lower.¹⁷ Trees, shade, and green and blue spaces such as waterways, rivers and coastal areas create comfortable, appealing places for activity, connection and time outdoors.²

Better access to healthy food

Neighbourhoods that support access to healthy food encourage healthier eating and help prevent obesity, both important in reducing heart disease.^{2,18,19} People prefer to buy food locally, including being able to walk to it.²⁰ Where neighbourhoods support access to healthy food, fruit and vegetable intake rises.²¹

Less air and noise pollution

Walkable neighbourhoods tend to have less air and noise pollution, which supports healthier cardiovascular risk profiles. The effect of traffic-related air and noise pollution on ischaemic heart disease is increasingly recognised, and is linked to oxidative stress, inflammation, changes to the nervous system, vascular dysfunction, and disrupted sleep and circadian rhythms.²²⁻²⁵ Research across 40 European cities found an average noise reduction of 2.5 dB where speed limits were lowered to 30 km/h.²⁶

Reduced climate impact

More walkable neighbourhoods support heart health by helping to mitigate climate change. Heatwaves, one effect of climate change, can affect heart health through changes in blood pressure and heart rate, and through dehydration.²⁷ In 2023, transport produced 21% of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, and 60% of that came from private cars and light commercial vehicles.²⁸ On current trends, transport is likely to become Australia's largest source of emissions by 2030.²⁸ Healthier, more walkable neighbourhoods can help by widening transport choice, including active and public transport. Heat-absorbing surfaces such as asphalt and concrete also create urban heat islands while more green infrastructure helps cool neighbourhoods and lower temperatures.^{2,3}

Where you live affects your heart health

Economically disadvantaged areas often have fewer of the design features that support heart healthy living,²⁹ which can leave people in these areas with lower physical activity and poorer health.³⁰ Less advantaged areas are also often further from city centres.²⁹

Housing in outer areas can cost less to buy, but transport costs, longer commutes, less recreational time and associated health costs can reduce or offset that saving.^{3,29,30} This matters most for people who have limited choice about where they can afford to live.²⁹ Heart healthy neighbourhoods can improve cost-of-living outcomes by lowering some household spending on transport, medical bills and utilities.^{30,31}

Infrastructure and services should be in place as new outer suburbs are settled, rather than arriving years later. When transport, services and green space lag behind new housing, residents depend on cars, have little access to everyday activity and connection, and face poorer health outcomes. Early delivery, timed to the arrival of new residents, helps prevent this and supports better health from the start.³²

Every level of government has a role

Housing supply, cost of living and climate change are national priorities. Each one is an opportunity to embed health in the decisions that shape neighbourhoods. The following actions apply across all levels of government.^{2,3,4}

Embed health objectives in housing, transport, planning and infrastructure policy and funding.

These policies shape whether people can reach daily needs close to home, and whether walking, wheeling, bike riding and public transport are realistic choices. A shared health objective across planning, housing, engineering, asset management, public health and transport creates a clearer path to preventive health, equity and climate outcomes together.

Invest in compact, mixed-use neighbourhoods with appropriate density, diverse housing and green infrastructure, in new and retrofitted suburbs.

Compact, well-connected neighbourhoods place fresh healthy food, green space, schools, businesses, community facilities and services close to home. Appropriate density and housing diversity support the viability of these local destinations.

Invest in liveable streets that prioritise walking, wheeling, bike riding and public transport.

Liveable streets offer safe, accessible, connected and shaded infrastructure, supported by slower speeds in neighbourhoods. They reduce reliance on private vehicles, lift physical activity and social connection, help mitigate climate change, and reduce exposure to air and noise pollution.

Use and embed Healthy Active by Design in planning, transport, infrastructure and place decisions.

Healthy Active by Design is a practical, evidence-based resource. Embedding [Healthy Active by Design](#) in legislation, plans, strategies and day-to-day decisions helps guide healthier neighbourhoods and public spaces.

The benefits of acting

These actions would:

- make it easier for more people to build physical activity, social connection and healthy eating into everyday life
- reduce avoidable reliance on private vehicles
- support more equitable health outcomes
- deliver health, environmental, economic and social benefits across sectors.

About us

The Heart Foundation is Australia's trusted for-purpose organisation, working to ensure heart health is achievable by everyone in Australia by 2050. We are committed to advancing heart health equity and to supporting environments and systems that enable lifelong healthy behaviours.

Through [Healthy Active by Design](#) and related evidence-based resources, the Heart Foundation supports governments, practitioners and communities to make planning, transport, housing and infrastructure decisions that create healthier, more active and more liveable places. Our evidence papers provide practical recommendations for all levels of government and for community members.

healthyactivebydesign.com.au

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